

What Is Claimed Is:

1. A method for preventive protection of vehicle occupants in dangerous situations,  
wherein the distance (a) of the vehicle (1) to objects (2) on the roadside is determined on an ongoing basis according to size,  
it is determined whether this distance (a) is less than a critical distance ( $a_{crit}$ ),  
and  
protective measures are initiated when such a determination is made.
2. The method as recited in Claim 1,  
wherein, if it is determined that the actual distance is less than a first critical distance, protective measures of a first kind are initiated, and if it is determined that the actual distance is less than a second critical value, which is less than the first critical value, protective measures of a second kind are initiated.
3. The method as recited in Claim 2,  
wherein the protective measure of the first kind is an audible and/or visible signaling to the vehicle's driver.
4. The method as recited in Claim 2 or Claim 3,  
wherein the protective measure of the second type is activation of reversible restraining means (11) and/or preparation of irreversible restraining means (10).
5. The method as recited in one of Claims 1 through 4,  
wherein, if the determined distance (a) again exceeds the critical distance ( $a_{crit}$ ), the initiated protective measures are canceled again.
6. The method as recited in one of Claims 1 through 5,  
wherein the host vehicle velocity ( $V_{host}$ ) is determined by magnitude, and the critical distance ( $a_{crit}$ ) is determined as a function of the determined host vehicle velocity ( $V_{host}$ ) or the relative velocity with respect to the objects (2).

7. The method as recited in Claim 6,  
wherein the function is determined in such a way that below a predefined host vehicle velocity ( $V_{\min}$ ), the critical distance ( $a_{\text{crit}}$ ) is zero, and above a predefined distance ( $a_{\max}$ ), the critical distance ( $a_{\text{crit}}$ ) is independent of the host vehicle velocity, and between those two pairs of values, the relationship between the host vehicle velocity ( $V_{\text{host}}$ ) and the critical distance ( $a_{\text{crit}}$ ) runs in an essentially linear fashion, i.e. according to a predefined function.
8. A system for carrying out the method as recited in one of Claims 1 through 7, characterized by a comparator (7), which receives a signal corresponding to the actual distance ( $a$ ) of the vehicle (1) to objects (2) on the roadside and compares it to a signal corresponding to a critical distance ( $a_{\text{crit}}$ ), and in the given case ( $a < a_{\text{crit}}$ ) outputs an appropriate signal (13) to a trigger circuit (9) for triggering reversible restraining means (11).
9. The system as recited in Claim 8,  
wherein the comparator (7) also receives a signal corresponding to the velocity ( $V_{\text{host}}$ ) of the host vehicle (1) and retrieves a critical distance ( $a_{\text{crit}}$ ) assigned to this host vehicle velocity ( $V_{\text{host}}$ ) from a memory (8) for comparison with the determined distance ( $a$ ).
10. The system as recited in Claim 8 and Claim 9,  
wherein the signal (13) output by the comparator (7) triggers an acoustic and/or visual alarm device (16).
11. The system as recited in Claim 10,  
wherein the alarm device (16) is triggerable if the distance ( $a$ ) is less than a first critical distance ( $a_{\text{crit}}$ ), while reversible restraining means (11) are not triggerable until the distance is less than a second critical distance, which is less than the first critical distance.